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Book Review: Standing Bear Is a Person: The True Story of a Native American's Quest for Justice

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Standing Bear Is a Person: The True Story of a Native American's Quest for Justice. By Stephen Dando-Collins. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004. x + 259 pp. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.

Poncas still remember the events surrounding the 1879 verdict that first recognized Constitutionally protected Native rights. Descendants—some only one generation removed from the forced march that preceded the trial—continue to live on the Great Plains and share the stories of the long walk to Indian Territory. Unfortunately, this text does not attempt to incorporate contemporary Native voices that can enrich such an important historical narrative.

Dando-Collins employs a friendly, conversational tone well suited for an average reader. Those unfamiliar with Standing Bear will find a lucid primer of the events leading to the trial, Judge Elmer Dundy's decision, and Standing Bear's subsequent East Coast speaking tours. What we have here, however, is a simplified synthesis of newspaper articles, Senate reports, and published accounts written by Thomas

Henry Tibbles and Brigadier General George Crook's aide-de-camp, Captain John Gregory Bourke. Serious readers should not expect to find material from previously unused primary sources, surviving oral tradition, or thoughtful scholarship that would say something new. Rather than fully tapping the rich, multidimensional historical record, Dando-Collins fills in blanks with undocumented suppositions about emotions and events. Scholars will glean little they cannot already find in accounts written a century ago.

Also notably absent is any treatment of the land—something that should be fundamental in serious accounts of Plains Indians. Dando-Collins, an Australian, fails to incorporate accurate geographic descriptions of the Poncas' Niobrara River Valley. By not having seen the river himself or having spent time understanding the dynamic balance of six major ecosystems surrounding the ancestral homeland, he could not in turn understand the reasons the forcibly removed Poncas ultimately chose as their new reservation a similar river valley near present-day Ponca City, Oklahoma. Nor could he thoughtfully articulate the motivating factor behind Standing Bear's defying military orders and walking home with the bones of his son during a Plains winter. To tell the story of the Poncas and their great struggles, one must understand their land and what it meant to them and continues to mean.

Standing Bear Is a Person does succeed in promoting continued interest in a significant civil rights case. In doing so, however, it employs clichés, pulp descriptions of nineteenth-century Nebraska, and insufficient regard for today's Poncas living on the Great Plains and throughout the United States.

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